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## Federal stimulus money boosts job training efforts in KC

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The Kansas City Star

“Where did the stimulus money go?”

That’s been a common question among Americans, who hear and read frequently about the bailouts and loans received by Wall Street firms, banks and auto manufacturers, not to mention executive bonuses. But many wonder if any funding has helped the average unemployed Joe on Main Street.

The nearly \$800 billion that Congress approved in February in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has been funneled through various channels, from tax cuts to extended jobless benefits to infrastructure improvements. But if there’s one place the stimulus money’s impact is seen, it’s in the job-training sector.

Through the spring and summer, local organizations like the Full Employment Council on the Missouri side and the Workforce Partnership on the Kansas side have helped thousands of area residents receive training, as well as employment opportunities that otherwise wouldn’t exist.

And though the funding was a one-time allotment, job-training experts believe long term benefits will be realized as the economy bounces back and more employers have a pool of qualified and trained workers from which to hire.

For Clyde McQueen, chief executive of the Full Employment Council, the stimulus funding was a godsend. McQueen has been in the job-placement business a long time, as far back as the early 1980s — the last time the nation’s unemployment rate hovered around 10 percent.

McQueen’s experience and knowledge even took him to Capitol Hill this past summer as he urged a Senate committee to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act, a national job-training program that continues to receive some funding annually without a new bill being passed.

But McQueen, who has headed the Kansas City-based organization for more than 20 years, said the scope of the people laid off in this downturn has been unprecedented in his professional lifetime.

“You have everyone from waiters and waitresses to top executives to middle management to professional staff losing jobs,” he said in a recent interview. “Couple that with the lack of credit available to most of the unemployed and the rate at which these jobs were lost and you have an economic downturn much more complicated than in the past.”

But that’s where Full Employment Council steps in, providing the unemployed and underemployed with jobless benefits services, job placement and training assistance.

With four area one-stop career centers and four other locations, the council serves Jackson, Cass, Clay, Platte and Ray counties.

McQueen said the onslaught of displaced workers began arriving at the council’s area Missouri Career Centers last year, and by October the agency was depleted of training funds. So the nearly \$8 million that arrived in March through the federal stimulus bill (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) along with state assistance was crucial.

“There was this pent-up demand. People were waiting for the funding to be able to get the training,” he said.

The urgency of the situation, with more people continuing to leave the payrolls and looking for new jobs that were scarce, pushed the agency to act quickly and creatively, McQueen said.

The agency took a three-pronged approach, directing the stimulus money to economically disadvantaged adults, dislocated workers and youth summer jobs.

### Stimulus focus

The youth summer jobs program, which had been scaled down the past 10 years for lack of federal funding, was expanded this year with the stimulus funds. Normally for 16- to 21-year olds, the program was widened to include adults up to 24 years old.

In recent years, most of the youths in the summer jobs program were placed at nonprofit agencies. But the stimulus money allowed more private-sector employers to participate once again, according to McQueen. The aim was to direct the youths toward jobs that they could make into a career with further education and training.

About 1,200 area youths and adults participated, working for \$8 an hour for 32 hours a week over two months. The program ended this month. While such an endeavor did not get the attention that Cash for Clunkers did, McQueen said the effect was similar when considering that the funding made summer jobs available around the country.

“It really provided a direct benefit, with young people receiving a paycheck that allows them to spend money, as well as save for their future education,” he said.

For those successfully completing the job, the program also made available \$1,000 scholarships for community colleges and vocational schools and \$500 book scholarships for those attending a four-year college.

“The objective was making this not just a one-shot program, but leveraging opportunities to enroll in postsecondary education,” McQueen said.

The stimulus money also funded two other programs at the Full Employment Council, one for economically disadvantaged adults seeking jobs and the other for laid-off workers affected by structural changes in the economy.

In addition to providing training assistance and job-placement services, the stimulus money allowed those receiving training to take on internships at their potential employer and work during an evaluation process.

“The employer is able to try that person out while we pay them,” McQueen said. “Given the huge pool of unemployed workers, we were looking for ways to increase the hiring rate of people going through the career centers.”

Those two programs combined to train about 575 people this summer for new careers. Many of those are still going to classes or their internships at this point, according to McQueen.

#### Green partnerships

Stimulus funds also allowed the council to work with schools to create training programs for green or environmentally friendly jobs. McQueen said the agency has worked with the Workforce Central program at the University of Central Missouri, as well as Metropolitan Community College.

McQueen said most of the green-collar jobs are of an entry-level nature, such as “weatherization technicians” for home-improvement companies doing things like caulking, weather-stripping and installing installation for residences.

But other programs have offered training for some of the newer and more sophisticated green companies that are surfacing.

McQueen said the agency worked with Central Missouri to create a course on solar-panel installation, which were the type of employees Pave Guard Technologies was looking to hire.

Pave Guard is a Lee’s Summit-based startup that has devised a way to use solar power to prevent ice and snow from forming on pavement, bridges and parking lots. The company has secured a contract with the Missouri Department of Transportation to begin projects on various roads and bridges later this year.

Pave Guard contacted the Full Employment Council, which sought Central Missouri to run the program, said Corey McDonald, co-owner of the company.

Eleven of the 15 people who started the training program completed it and are now employed by Pave Guard, including six solar-panel installers.

“Right now, they’re the only certified solar-panel installers in the state of Missouri,” McDonald said.

Pave Guard quickly went from having about a half-dozen employees to now having 18. State projects are forthcoming, including installing the company’s system on a bridge in Excelsior Springs next month, according to McDonald.

“Through the training course, we were able to hire dislocated workers from a whole range of industries, including construction,” he said. “Our company hits every component of the stimulus bill, from using green technology to improving the infrastructure.”

McQueen noted that the council will be working with other green companies that are expanding in the area, such as Kokam America’s battery plant in Lee’s Summit and Smith Electric Vehicles, which plans to produce electric commercial vans in the Northland.

“The green type of jobs exist, but you have to train for them,” he said. “... The good thing about our region is we have the beginning infrastructure in place for these green technologies.”

Not only does the council have to train people for the types of jobs that will be available in the future, but the courses also have to be formed and offered as soon as possible so employers with openings can hire them right away.

“More of the courses are moving out of being semester-based,” McQueen said. “If a company is hiring in September, we can’t wait till September to start training them. With the right type of planning and notice, we can develop just-in-time and on-demand training.”

Metropolitan Community College has focused training on industries with job openings, such as health care, green technology and information technology, said Margaret Boyd, executive director of workforce development for MCC Business & Learning Solutions.

But community colleges also are flexible as they partner with groups like the Full Employment Council.

“A lot of what’s coming out of the Obama administration is the idea that we can’t just have course catalogs any longer,” Boyd said. “We have to customize around the students’ needs for a particular job, including in basic areas like reading and math. Also, the stimulus money has accelerated everything. We’re trying to complete training in several weeks instead of a few months.”

In position

Now that the training and employment money has been spent, the people in the business of finding jobs for the unemployed believe the stimulus is working. But it’s not a cure-all and end-all.

“The stimulus is short term, something to get you over the hump,” McQueen said. “But our objective is to position the people and companies we’re working with on a long-term basis. Because when the economy comes back, the communities that will get the new plants and offices will be the ones with the workers who have the skills to do those new jobs.”

Pave Guard’s McDonald said jobs at his company have average annual salaries of more than \$40,000.

“We’re not in business for the short term,” he said. “We plan to be here a long time.”

As an economic development official who has worked through every business cycle since the late 1970s, McQueen understands what’s around the corner.

“When we come out of this recession, we’re all going to be in a global race to reap the benefits of a booming economy,” he said. “We have to start doing the things necessary to position ourselves so we’re up near the starting line, not in the middle or back of the pack.”

Employment assistance IN KANSAS

The Workforce Partnership, which serves Johnson, Wyandotte and Leavenworth counties in Kansas, received \$4 million in federal stimulus funds. About \$2.3 million was parceled out for the summer jobs program for about 800 teenagers and young adults. The rest went to training and skills programs for adult and dislocated workers.

For more information and the locations of Workforce Partnership centers, go to [www.workforcepartnership.com](http://www.workforcepartnership.com).

IN MISSOURI There are four Missouri Career Resource Centers in the metropolitan area, including the Full Employment Council office at 1740 the Paseo. Other centers are in the Northland, south Kansas City and Independence. The Full Employment Council also has offices in Platte County and Ray County, and in Belton and Harrisonville in Cass County.

Learn more at [www.feckc.org](http://www.feckc.org) or [www.missouricareersource.com](http://www.missouricareersource.com).

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